

“LESS FRILLS IN EVERYTHING”

OBERLIN COLLEGE LIFE DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

by Susan Haskell '95

**An exhibition at the
Oberlin College Library
to complement a special reunion of the
Classes of 1939 to 1949**

August - September 1995

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The Special Collections Department of the Oberlin College Library and the College Archives are very pleased to be able to join with the Alumni Association in welcoming members of the classes of 1939 to 1949 as they reflect on the '40s and the impact of the War years. Margaret Erikson, Directory of On-Campus Alumni Activities, provided funds to both hire Susan Haskell, '95, who created and mounted the exhibition, and to print this souvenir booklet.

All the materials in this exhibition are from the Oberlin College Archives and Special Collections. We would like to express our thanks to the staff of the Archives, Roland Baumann, Mary Margaret Giannini, and Tammy Martin who spent many hours helping to locate material, giving suggestions, and facilitating the preparation of the exhibition in many other ways. We appreciate and are grateful for their cooperation in allowing the use of so many items from the collection.

As the general supervisor of the installation, I would like to thank Susan for her excellent work and wish her well in future endeavors.

Dina Schoonmaker
Special Collections

Quotation and general information indebted to Jan Ting, 1970, student seminar paper "Oberlin College during World War II", Oberlin College Archives, Student Papers. I also consulted The Oberlin Review, the Oberlin Alumni Magazine, and the Hi-O-Hi.

Susan Haskell

“Less Frills in Everything”: Oberlin College Life During the Second World War

August, 1995, marks the fiftieth anniversary of the end of WWII. This past year we have witnessed a nationwide and worldwide reopening of discussion about the war and its meaning in the history of the U.S. and other countries involved. As Oberlin College welcomes the reunion of its war era alumni, we, too, are offered the opportunity to rethink the war by looking back and seeing how it was experienced by one community of individuals. This brochure guides the viewer through the WWII exhibition set up in the Library which presents a glimpse into campus life during the war years.

From Isolationism to Interventionism

A perusal of 1941 issues of the Oberlin Review turns up remarkably little about the war in Europe. Until the escalation of events overseas and the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the war seems to have been a rather distant concern for most Oberlin students. President Ernest Hatch Wilkins set a tone of pacifism for the school as a patron of the Oberlin Peace Society and as a national spokesman for pacifism, and students (like students everywhere) were generally more preoccupied with their studies and campus activities than with international events.

The peace consensus, however, began to break down under pressure from outside events and campus individuals agitating for U.S. participation in the war

effort. Faculty members Frederick B. Artz and Oscar Jaszi organized an Oberlin faction of the Committee to Defend America by Aiding the Allies and managed to acquire the signatures of 95% of the faculty in support of the organization. Wilkins himself abandoned his pacifist stance as the war gained momentum. Students also began to rally behind the war. An editorial in the October 17, 1941 issue of The Review entitled "Declare War Now" by Norman Lyle, Jr., suggests the shift in student opinion. It's publication provoked heated debate and was lauded by Oberlin professors as appropriately realistic. Students organized an Oberlin faction of the

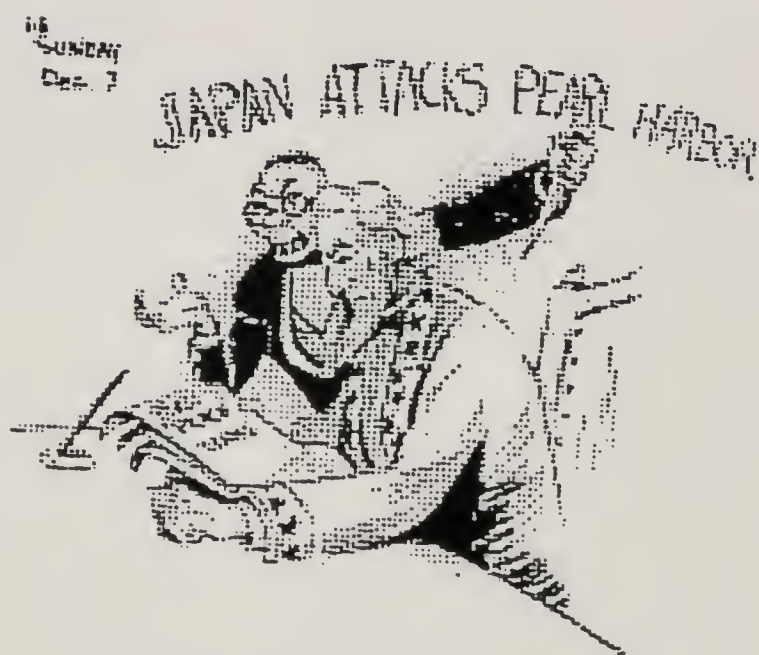
Committee for Democratic Action to further mobilize students in support of the war.

By the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the balance was tipped. In their cartoon depiction of that fateful day, the male boarders at Delta House recorded in their log book

the patriotic fervor and racist anger inspired by that event. As the Spring semester of 1942 got under way, men left daily to join the service.

The College on a War Basis

In a speech before the student body soon after the U.S. entered the war, President Wilkins conceded ways in which the college course would be altered by the war but asserted that Oberlin's dedication to academic



excellence and scholarly debate would continue unimpeded. Changes would include the division of the academic calendar into three parts to allow men to graduate before draft age and the addition of new courses relevant to the war effort, such as cartography, meteorology, electrical communications, and navigation. Non-credit Red Cross courses for women would also be offered through the Collegiate Service Organization in first aid, life saving, home nursing, and auto mechanics. To accommodate the growing prominence of science edu-



cation in an age of accelerated war technology, the college built a new physics building in 1942 and hired new physics and math faculty. The professors displayed represent some of the faculty members who facilitated Wilkins' goal of continued academic excellence.

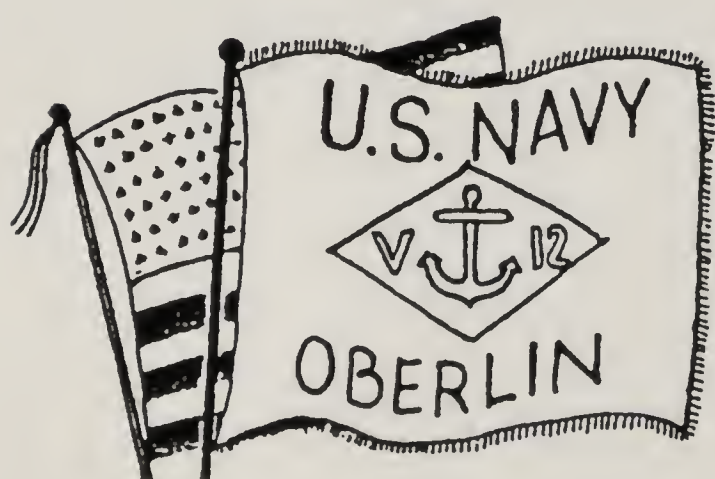
On the Homefront

As men and women went off to war, people at home rallied behind the war cause. Women at Oberlin, like women across the country, took on positions of unprecedented responsibility and leadership while the men were away. Women served as senior class president, editor and business manager of the Review, president of the student council, editor and business manager of the Hi-O-Hi, and chairwomen of the 1944 Mock Convention. Organizations such as the Y.W.C.A. (Young Women's Christian Association) and the C.S.O.

(Collegiate Service Organization) provided a structure through which women could organize their relief efforts. Together with unenlisted men and the Oberlin town community, they worked to send packages to soldiers and supplies to war-torn civilians in Europe. War time propaganda promoted austerity in the use of energy, rubber, and other valuable resources, and ration books and disks curbed consumption.

The Navy V-12

One of the major innovations on the college campus during the war years was the college's decision to house and train a Navy V-12 unit under the government plan to station college-bound or educated enlisted men on college campuses so as to train them to become

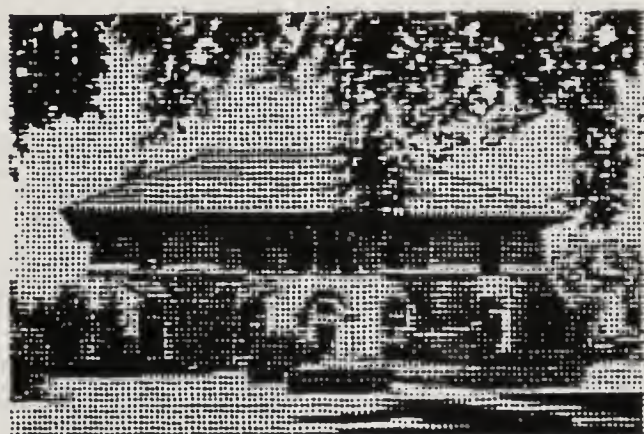


officers, cadets, and medical personnel. During the month of July, 1943, a Naval unit consisting of 730 men, half Bluejackets (Navy) and half Marines, arrived on campus. Many of the men found themselves unprepared for Oberlin's academic rigor

and liberal traditions and were particularly angered by the condescension shown them by some Oberlin professors. Tensions, however, were few, and the V-12 enabled the college to continue functioning as an institution of learning during the war years by maintaining a relatively even ratio of men to women and by shielding the campus from being used by the military for less academic purposes. The last of the V-12 unit left in early 1946.

Men and Women in the Service

A total of nearly 2400 Oberlin men and women were in the service by the end of 1944. President Wilkins took on the huge task of corresponding with every one of them. As early as February, 1943, he was receiving 20 letters a day from 900 Oberlinians on active duty, all of which he answered. He and his staff also arranged to send The Review and the Oberlin Alumni Magazine to men and women overseas and offered free University of Chicago correspondence courses. The display case shows a few representative letters to or from President Wilkins and examples of the Christmas and birthday cards sent to every service man and woman. Note in particular Bruce Bockstanz's letter as a prisoner of war and Jack Sunshine's harrowing description of Nazi concentration camps. Wilkins responded particularly warmly to accounts from his beloved home away from home: Italy.



a birthday greeting

Just before graduation, 1943, came news of the first Oberlin casualty: Pfc., Walter G. Webb, class of 1940, killed in action. 57 Oberlin men were reported casualties by the end of the war.

Oberlin claimed at least 34 conscientious objectors to the war in Civilian Public Service among its students and alumni in 1944. This number apparently placed Oberlin "near the top of the list of colleges and universities" for the number of its graduates and students serving in the CPS. When surveyed in 1944 by the Oberlin Alumni Magazine, 17 were working in asylums,

hospitals or schools for the “feeble minded,” six were in forestry or soil conservation service, four were serving as “guinea pigs” for scientific experiments, four were in administrative positions, and at least two were in jail for refusing to serve even in the C.P.S..

Social Life in the War Years

The party did not end with the onset of war. As one 1943 graduate recalled, “You knew you were going to get real serious, real soon, and you tried to stave it off.” The ratio of men to women went through some dramatic changes and altered the social scene in some profound ways. Before the arrival of the V-12 men, the men on campus were greatly outnumbered by women. When the V-12 unit arrived, the ratio of men to women during

some sessions was better than 10 to one. The men were so hard-pressed for dates during these periods that they often headed for Cleveland on their free nights.



Formal dances continued to be a popular weekend night activity. “Necking,” though logistically difficult with the social regulations in place at the time, was also a favorite student past-time. Student publications, such as Picolymp, a campus life magazine, and The Yeoman, a

literary journal, depicted student life during the war years in frank terms.

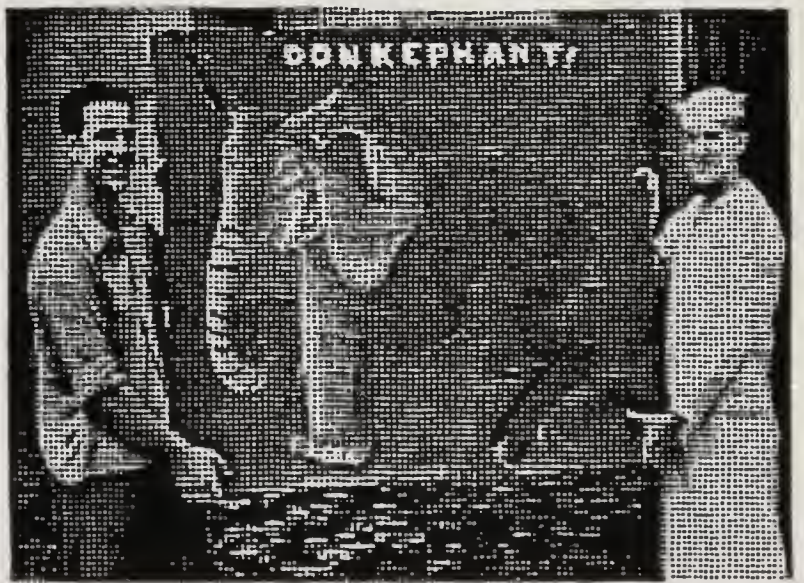
The Yeoman got in trouble one semester for publishing the poem, "Original Sin in the Arboretum," for its allegedly obscene inferences. The controversy over the poem sparked a free speech debate on campus.



Student social life centered around boarding houses which, spread throughout town, provided living quarters for a small group of men or women and a housemother to watch over them. Some houses kept a running journal of their escapades, including the one displayed here from Delta House.

Extra-Curricular Activities

The college abounded with extra-curricular activities during the war years. One of the most eagerly anticipated events on campus was the Mock Convention, held every election year, for which students spent weeks preparing speeches and organizing campaign strategies. The college settled on allowing the students to hold a Non-Partisan convention in 1944 so as not to conflict with the Navy V-12's duty to remain non-partisan. The event did not lack contentious issues however, as the displayed photos show.



Physical education was a serious part of a woman's college career. Women participated in activities like synchronized swimming, basketball, volleyball, modern dance, and archery. Dr. Gertrude E. Moulton

provided well-respected leadership for the women in the physical education department.

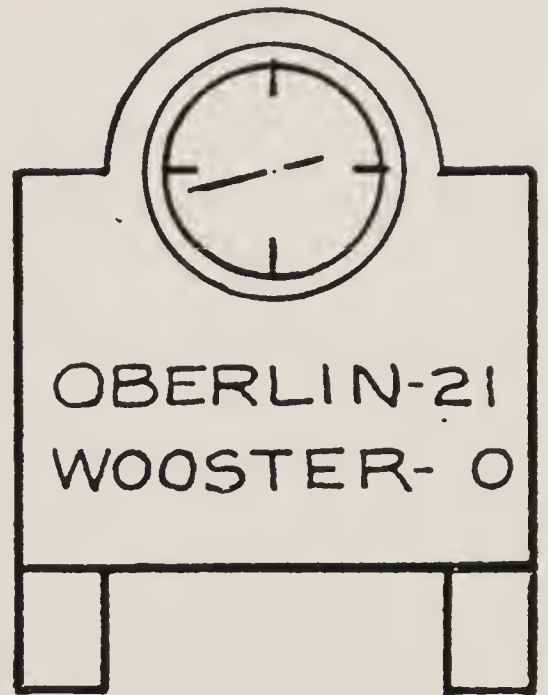
Other popular extra-curricular organizations included The Oberlin Drama Association, which produced several plays every year even during the war years, and the Oberlin Glee Club, which thrived under the leadership of Jack Wirkler.

Some students, like good Oberlinians, spent their free time engaged in social justice activities. Some challenged war time assumptions by objecting to the treatment of Japanese-Americans. Students sent aid to children in relocation camps or protested the camps' existence in assembly speeches. In the Fall of 1942 seventeen Japanese-Americans arrived in Oberlin, including eleven who were relocated from western colleges and sent to Oberlin as part of a program to allow Japanese-American evacuees from the West to attend college in the East. While some students treated these new students with hostility (particularly Navy V-12 men, apparently), others welcomed their presence on campus. One relocated student, Kenji Okuda, was elected president of the Student Council in 1943.

Race issues were explosive during the war years. Students charged the administration with social discrimination for the school's restrictive policies on interracial dating and dancing and for its segregated rooming and job assignments. The school was also rife with controversy over segregation practices in local barber shops. A group of seminary students demonstrated against the shops, provoking criticism from some students on the pages of The Review.

Sports

The war years were glorious ones for the Oberlin football team. The 1942 season, with five wins, was the best recorded since 1927, highlighted by a 21-7 victory over Wooster, whose team had defeated Oberlin for 11 straight years. In 1943, the Oberlin team, boosted heavily by Navy V-12 enrollment, had its first undefeated season since 1925. Oberlin also achieved the National Junior A.A.U. title in cross-country and boasted an undefeated swimming team.



The War Draws to a Close

After A-Bombs exploded over Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Professor Lloyd Taylor in the physics department conducted a survey of Oberlin alumni who had participated in scientific weaponry development. In an article published in the Alumni Magazine originally titled "Now it Can be Told," Taylor reported his findings. He reports that at least six Oberlin grads contributed to the Manhattan District Project (Atomic Bomb) and twenty-one in Microwave / Proximity Fuse Development. Taylor the bomb would not emerge until a year later.

When the celebrations were over, veterans who had left Oberlin before receiving their diplomas came back to finish their academic careers.

To accomodate their numbers and the many married couples, some with babies, who returned after the war, the college set up trailer housing in what is now North campus. Pictured are some of the families who inhabited the trailer park.



In 1947, William E. Stevenson was inaugurated to the Oberlin presidency. He and his wife, Eleanor “Bumpy” Stevenson, brought to Oberlin their flair for fun and entertainment and a commitment to social justice issues on campus and in town.

Conclusion

Most of the Oberlin community, like the rest of the country, never felt the harsh reality of war as it was felt by civilians in Europe and Asia. With the exception of those who lost family or friends to the war, their lives—though suffused with a spirit of unity, of excited dedication to the war effort, and of fear for the men overseas—continued much as it had before the war began. As the Hi-O-Hi yearbook for the year 1943-44 stated, the war required “less frills in everything,” but it did not require the sacrifice of Oberlin's thriving, dedicated, academic community.

ERRATUM:

p. 11, line 25 ff should read:

Taylor writes, "The Japanese can thank the atomic bomb for saving six and a quarter million of their own soldier's lives." Detailed information about the devastating after-effects of the bomb would not emerge until a year later.

